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The learning game

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Abstract (Article Summary)

Steve Brown is president and chief executive of **Raya Systems**, a developer of health-education software games and a company on track to do $2 million in 1993 sales, up from $1.2 million in 1992 and $400,000 in 1991. Raya has already made a role-playing adventure game for young diabetes patients for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System and another on AIDS education for personal computers. Now in the works is a 3rd adventure game, aimed at discouraging youngsters from smoking, that will play on both platforms and will reach the market in time for Christmas 1993. Raya was founded in December 1988 with 3 employees and now has 16. Brown projects $8 million in sales for 1994 and $50 million in 1998. In 1990, Brown collected a $50,000 grant from the ⓒNational Institutes of Health to see if he could develop a gamelike software educational program for diabetics. As more games are introduced and sales increase, Raya will rely increasingly less on the $1 million annually it collects for software development on behalf of Boehringer Mannheim and other companies.

Full Text (736 words)

For somebody who never got a dime from venture capitalists or anyone else, 28-year-old entrepreneur and software wunderkind Steve Brown is doing just fine--and is likely to do far better.

Brown is president and chief executive of Raya Systems, a Mountain View, Calif., developer of health-education software games and a company on track to do $2 million in sales this year, up from $1.2 million in 1992 and $400,000 in 1991.

Raya has already made a role-playing adventure game for young diabetes patients for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System and another on AIDS education for personal computers. Now in the works is a third adventure game, aimed at discouraging youngsters from smoking, that will play on both platforms and hit the market in time for Christmas.

Brown, a ⓘNintendo licensee, has yet another four games planned for release by the fall of 1994. Clearly, the young workaholic--12-hour days are typical--is on to something big.

Raya recently gave 10 copies of the AIDS game, "The AIDS Avenger," to Yerba Buena High School in San Jose, Calif., one of three West Coast schools testing the program. During lunch hour, Principal Gary Zellner commonly sees up to 10 students using the software. "They're viewing 'AIDS Avenger' as a game, not as a learning exercise, and nobody has said they even have to look at it," he says. "That tells you something."

Another "ATDS Avenger" advocate is the Seattle-based Northwest AIDS Foundation, which plans to buy 26 copies of the $40 program and distribute them free to Seattle's high schools and middle schools.

"First and foremost, 'AIDS Avenger' is a good video game with nice graphics, good music, and clever situations," says Jeff Natter, the foundation's education manager. "The information in the game is also thorough, accurate, and specific, making it a wonderful AIDS educational supplement."

Raya was founded in December 1988 with three employees and now has 16. But Brown figures growth has just started. He projects $8 million in sales next year and $50 million in five years.

"We're dealing with issues we can't afford to sugarcoat," he says. "AIDS, for example, is the No. 1 health issue for young people, and it's the only disease that is 100 percent preventable through education."

The genesis of Raya Systems dates back to January 1987, when Brown, a ⓘStanford senior majoring in physics, took a half-year off to study German in Berlin. He mastered the language quickly and got an internship at a government research institute in Munich that focuses on the computerization of medical information. There, he saw big opportunities for someone who could develop software for database management for diabetes patients, prodding him to develop a graphics program in about a month.

People at the institute showed it to Boehringer Mannheim, a big pharmaceutical company in Mannheim, Germany, that makes diagnostic devices for diabetics.

The company licensed Brown's program in 1987 and gave him a contract to develop better versions of the software for use by both doctors and patients.

After working for Boehringer Mannheim for a year and accumulating $45,000, Brown returned to California and used his savings to open Raya Systems.

In 1990, Brown collected a $50,000 grant from the ⓘNational Institutes of Health to see if he could develop a gamelike software educational program for diabetics. With additional financial support from Danish-based Novo Nordisk Pharmaceuticals Inc., Brown's effort eventually led to the 1992 unveiling of "Captain Novolin," named after Novo Nordisk's product, Novolin, one of the world's biggest-selling insulin brands.

"The AIDS Avenger" went on sale this past April. PCSL Software Publishers Inc., the game's chief distributor, in Nashville, Tenn., reports that retail sales have had a slow start, mostly because merchants are skittish about selling a product linked to such a controversial problem. But the company adds that negotiations are under way with public school systems in six states over the purchase of 15,000 copies of the software.

"Ultimately, I'm convinced we'll place the software in major chain stores and sell 100,000 copies in two years,"

says PCSL President Claude Miller. "Stores will like it because kids like it."

As more games are introduced and sales increase, Raya will rely increasingly less on the $1 million annually it still collects for software development on behalf of Boehringer Mannheim and other companies. This suits Brown just fine. "It pays to be diligent," he says.

Steven B. Kaufman is a free-lance writer in San Jose, Calif.

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